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*A Thousand Splendid Suns*

By Khaled Hosseini

**Summary:** As the final section begins, the Taliban have taken over Kabul and have imposed strict rules that prohibit all forms of expression; the rules regarding the actions of women are especially harsh. Laila, pregnant with Rasheed’s baby, is refused service at the main hospital in Kabul because she is a woman. With no other options, Laila and company must fight the crowds at a local clinic. She gives birth to Zalmai, who immediately favors Rasheed; Rasheed is elated to finally have a son. As food and resources run dry in Kabul under Taliban rule, the family is forced to sell almost all of their possessions. Mariam even goes so far as attempting to contact Jalil for help, but learns he is dead. Against Laila’s better judgment, she agrees to send Aziza to an orphanage so that she will at least get one meal a day. Because women are forbidden to travel alone, Rasheed must accompany Laila and Mariam whenever they want to visit Aziza. He initially helps but soon refuses to travel with them, forcing Laila to sneak to the orphanage and risk arrest. As Laila returns from one of these trips, she sees a man leaning against her fence. The man is Tariq, her lifelong lover.

The reunion is emotionally charged, with neither believing that the other is actually alive. Tariq and Laila fill each other in about their lives since they parted, but Tariq disappears shortly before Rasheed arrives home from work. Zalmai, Rasheed’s favorite child, informs him that there was a man in the house while he was away. He soon learns that it was Tariq and flies into a rage. Rasheed nearly strangles Laila, but Mariam ends up smashing Rasheed’s head with a shovel and killing him. Unsure of what to do next, Mariam tells Laila and the kids to flee before the authorities come. She agrees to take the blame; later, Mariam is tried and executed.

Tariq and Laila marry and take the kids to live in Murree. Shortly after they settle in, Laila realizes that her heart is back in Afghanistan so the family makes plans to move back. Meanwhile, the Taliban have attacked targets in the United States and President Bush has declared war on Afghanistan. On the journey back to Kabul, the family stops in Herat to visit the house where Mariam grew up. As the story closes, the family optimistically moves home and finds work at the orphanage where Aziza previously lived.

**Analysis:** As I reflect on the book as a whole, I am struck by how long and deep of an emotional journey the author has taken the reader on. In previous posts I commented on my inability to directly relate with the feelings and actions of the characters. Somewhere in the last third of the book things just ‘clicked’ for me and I couldn’t stop reading. Perhaps it was how graphic the beatings became; perhaps it was how strong the inseparable bond between Mariam and Laila, built on helping each other fight for survival, was. By the end it was hard not to root for the pair. As tragic and harsh Rasheed’s death was, it seemed like an appropriate ending for such a brutal reign as head of house. At some points I doubted that Hosseini was going to write a happy ending for the novel.

I enjoyed the hint of hope that the author concluded with. It brought the story full circle, from Mariam’s childhood dreams to Laila’s adulthood. I additionally enjoyed how the author brought back motifs from the beginning of the story and further intertwined the stories of Laila and Mariam. Laila visits Herat on her way back to Kabul and stops at the house of Mullah Faizullah, Mariam’s former teacher. Laila learns that Mullah Faizullah has passed on, but his son gives her a package from Jalil that was originally meant for Mariam. I found this aspect of the story to be particularly interesting.

As I finished the story, a strange connection between Afghanistan and the ancient Romans appeared. The Romans held public executions and games at the Colosseum, often delighting in the blood shed of animals and other people. In the story, Rasheed comes home and ecstatically talks about executions he witnessed earlier in the day. Additionally, Mariam’s execution is made to seem like it took place in front of a crowd of people. There appears to be a connection between the cruel minds of the ancient Greeks and modern Afghans.

In summary, I thoroughly enjoyed *A Thousand Splendid Suns.* I would not pick up a historical fiction piece to read for pleasure, but this novel was so well written that I hardly even noticed the genre. I also enjoy the way that Hosseini told two separate stories at the beginning, but in the end intertwined them. Going forth, I would thoroughly recommend this book to almost anyone.

**Application:** *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has proven that the theme of sacrifice has spanned time and culture. In the story, Mariam is unable to physically remove Rasheed from Laila’s chest. She resorts to smashing his head with a shovel in hopes of knocking him out, but ends up killing him. Hosseini writes, “When they do, they’ll find you as guilty as me. Tariq too. I won’t have the two of you living on the run like fugitives (319).” Mariam agrees to take the blame for the murder and allow Laila and the children to flee the country. She sacrifices her life to save the lives of her family.

The theme of sacrifice continues to be used in literature because it strikes poignant emotion in the reader. In this piece, the reader has been rooting for Mariam’s survival and now her entire life comes crashing down. The theme of sacrifice has deep ties to religion, proving that it has certainly spanned time. In the Christian faith, Jesus sacrificed his life so that the sins of the world could be forgiven. While sacrifice does literarily entertain, I am forced to believe that authors are more prone to use it in order to evoke emotion.

With regard to human nature, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* illustrates the fact that there is a wide range in the psychological stability of the human race. There are many instances in the story where Rasheed flies into a rage over the most basic of things. Perhaps the best example is his violence towards Laila after he learns that Tariq visited the house. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Laila and Mariam have remained relatively stable considering how poor their living conditions were. Not once in the story did they contemplate taking their own life, or take out their anger on other people. It must be noted, however, that they would have been severely punished for lashing out.

The final third of the book illustrates the point that humans are always tied to their hometown or place where they grew up. In the novel Laila and Tariq move to Murree, but it isn’t long before Laila dreams of going home. This goes hand in hand with the saying ‘there is no place like home.’ Speaking personally, I like to travel but also recognize how nice it is to come back home. With regard to human behavior, Hosseini illustrates humans’ psychological ties to home.

Laila believes Tariq to be dead, but is stunned to find him in her yard one afternoon. All of her childhood feelings and lust for Tariq return in an instant. There is a reason the phrase ‘true love never ties’ is so cliché, and that reason is because it is true. With regard to human ideals, Hosseini demonstrates that even in perceived death, ones feelings about someone do not simply vanish. They remain buried in one’s heart; this is evident through the relationship between Laila and Tariq. Even though many years have passed and both characters have dealt with unimaginable challenges, the relationship the two once had is quickly rekindled.

With roots in the religions of the world, the theme of sacrifice has spanned both time and culture. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns,* Mariam sacrifices her life to save her family’s lives. This piece also illustrated the mental instability in some people. The story also verified two cliché phrases, ‘there is place like home’ and ‘true love never dies.’ There are many lessons to be learned from this magnificent novel, and I feel that I have only scratched the surface.